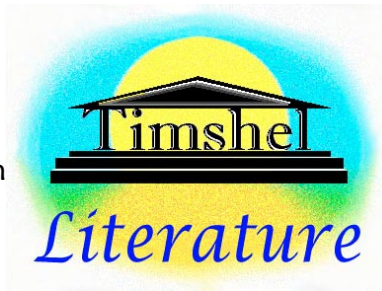


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Just Thinking, 04/21/03:

Another Ramble

by Justin Katz

A glow moves across a pile of embers like fickle wind moves across a field of high grass. Perhaps sometimes it *is* wind that forms the undeniable pattern of shifting red in the gray, but not always. It may be that waves of heat affect the intensity, or that the oxygen that fuels the burn sifts through unseen whirls and becomes a temporary shadow of them, a quickly fading representation of forces outside of sight. Forces, perhaps, that could be felt, but not without simultaneously burning the flesh.

I took the invisible particulars that directed the patterns of the embers on faith, last night, as I waited for them to subdue sufficiently to ease my fears of spreading flame. For this, I blame Hawthorne and his short story, "The Devil in Manuscript," in which an author's fireplace sacrifice of his work ignites the town in which he lives.

The fuel for the cast iron chiminea fire in my backyard was not the labor of my mind, but of my back: the branches and sticks scattered around the yard by the time the snow and wind of winter had finished abusing the trees. The sticks — and most of autumn's leaves — had avoided my gloved grasp through months during which I was unable to escape duties of other sorts as I fulfilled my roles as father, husband, family member, friend, wage earner, hopeful writer, and aspiring business builder.

Along with the slough of dead limbs rotting into the earth, and for the same reasons, anxieties collected and were rotting into my state of mind. The business remains mired in the definition of “hobby”; the writing gives the impression of just enough progress to encourage reluctance to discard one genre for another that would yield less response but more satisfaction; and the time siphoned from each day for these activities on top of paying work leaves interpersonal efforts with little space to bloom. Yet, the seeds for all are there, beneath the cold weight of sediment — hindered, certainly, by the peculiarly comfortable sentiment of doubt. The dark joys of wallowing in fine earthen powder discourage the incidental creation of mud if the seeds were to be watered. *They mightn't grow anyway*, goes the thinking.

Thus does one sink from stances that are held firmly on the grounds of emotion and logic, even into dry dirt. It comes from standing in place too long for fear of not going anywhere. It comes from the tendency to question God especially at those times when confidence in Him is most needed. It comes from forgetting the present and the things for which to be thankful in the present.

It comes from forgetting that we are alive in the present. And the irony that forgetting life increases fear of death. Every inexplicable bump in the skin is instantly assumed a tumor. Pressure in the head, likely no more than sinuses, rings in the ears like doom. Sore muscles and popping joints imply an age that is not true.

A doctor might dispel the worries... or might not. The patient can always think that something evaded the tests. When we need comfort and reassurance most, we are less likely to accept it even from those most qualified to give it. Yet, a patient who remembers life will require evidence least.

The same is true with prayer. When it holds its most desperate value, it is most likely to be done in doubt. *Prayer will not help.* versus *Prayer doesn't need to help, because God will.* How

quickly we can forget how much good prayer and faith have done in the past. Trust — how quickly that deteriorates, even against all evidence.

Something in the mind must shift. When life sifts into a slow burn, it seems but only lingering time until it has cooled. The glow that passes through the embers of our hopes seems random and without purpose. Even as we fear an aimless conflagration running unhindered throughout life were we to leave the stove unattended, still we lose hope — faith — that the gray coals might burst into new flame.

But the fuel is all the time before us, scattered around the yard. Taking a moment to throw it into the fire might bring warmth — and growth.